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THE GROUP AS AN INSTINCT

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ABSTRACT

Importance of group life. An individual is never an isolated being, psychologically, reactions being controlled by law, psychological law. Wars and conflicts grew out of the nature and relationship of groups. Group life is not evil but may be good. The group impulse is an instinct. *Instinct of the group.* Instinct is a product of evolution. The generalized social instinct is not enough to account for the facts. The survival of one's country is sweeter than the survival of one's self on account of this instinct. *Group not fixed.* Sight, smell, and hearing identify the group which may be tribe, religious group, or nation, but is not a fixed entity. *Loyalty is instinctive.* Gregariousness is the sublimation of a prior group instinct. Hatred of groups proves its instinctive quality. We do not know that we belong to complicated groups. Patriotism is the emotional side of the group instinct. We react to the group relationship unconsciously because it is normal and natural.

The classical method of determining the relationship of groups has been to define them legalistically and formally rather than psychologically, and then to try to maintain them on the same false basis. Legalism presupposes a deliberate rationalism which does not exist among human beings who most of the time are merely instinctive, emotional, and imitative, or otherwise manifesting controls below the level of rationality. Our reactions to group conditions seldom rise to the level of deliberation, whether they be devotion to fashion or to political opinion.

In view of the interpretation of the nature of the group in its instinctive relation to the individual, we must try to understand the individual differently than we would if he did not have this natural relationship. An individual is never an isolated being psychologically, not only because of the effect of others as stimuli on him, but because of his very nature which makes it impossible for him to fulfil himself except as a member of a group. The group is of the most vital importance to him, because of his own nature. Rationality has no meaning which does not involve the individual functioning as part of a group. The intellectualistic mode of thinking was accepted under the delusion that the individual was the unit of

thought. The prevalence of this mode, however, has been so general that the new psychology seems to some to be actually immoral in apparently substituting expediency for absolute dogma.

Although non-rational in the abstract sense, there is a universality and uniformity in the reactions which show that they are controlled by law, but it is psychological, not legislated law in its authority. The discovery of these laws must be empirical; but when they are adequately demonstrated, they will have as much validity as the laws of physics or chemistry. Dogma has caused indescribable error and disaster for which the world is now dearly paying.

Religion and philosophy have been prevailingly a priori and absolutistic rather than a posteriori and pragmatic. The first social studies coming from those nurtured in the "schools" naturally tended in the same direction; but whether such reasoning be justified or not in purely abstract fields, it has no justification in social science. As a student of William James, I used to resist his pragmatism; but as a sociologist, I soon became convinced that any other method is futile. No universally complete principle about society whose complexity is so infinite can be laid down. Pragmatism insists that the truth appears only so far as it proves to work and its working proves it to be truth. If we examine the ordinary interpretation of social phenomena, we shall discover that our social philosophy has been largely dominated by theories that are *not working* and therefore are not true. We do know, however, some things that work; and if we can classify the principles that are known to work, we shall have some positive law to which we can make practical adjustments, and by so far progress can take place.

Wars, revolutions, and class conflicts grow out of the nature and relationships of groups. To prevent them there is demanded, first, an understanding of their origin in this nature and relationship, and, second, an application of this understanding in both social and political science.

There is an unfortunate prevalence of the idea that the relationship of the individual to the group and of groups to each other is characteristically evil. The very amount of literature and tradition

about the dangers of the crowd and the pathology of mob psychology has seriously misled us. The implication has been that only the individual free from the control of the group is the normal and desirable person. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The emphasis which Le Bon and the other exponents of crowd psychology have put on the abnormal aspect has diverted our attention from the normal and tremendously vital forces of the group. In America the emphasis on individualism and the individual has made it difficult to readjust our thinking to a realization of the fact that the individual is not paramount. Only occasionally do we have the psychopathology of the mob. It is true, however, that the relationship of groups in the world is at present manifestly pathological, and the greatest problem is to discover some way in which the disease can be cured. This involves a new psychological interpretation.

We have never had an adequate explanation of the fact that men have always forsaken father and mother, wife and children, and left the dead to bury their own dead in order that they might fight even unto death for the preservation of their groups. The impulse which drives them to it lies deep in nature itself—deeper than values based on reason. *It is an instinct in its own right.*

Instinct is a product of the evolutionary process which persists in both the biological and psychological organization of the individual. It originated through the selection of spontaneous reactions which enabled the individual to survive. Some instincts cease to be significant for survival though they continue to function. Fear of snakes and lightning are examples. Others continue to preserve the individual and the race from extinction. The food and mating instincts are fundamental. The generalized social instinct is not adequate to meet all the conditions. No individual ever survived through society in general, but always by belonging to a specific group of which he was in his very nature an integral part and from which his social qualities are derived. In other words, the instinct does not come from the need of an association with people in general, but from specific groups without which no individual has ever survived. The individual, according to the theory maintained in this study, brings to the group a predisposition to

identify himself with it, and its influence on him arises from his own nature. By nature he is adapted to the group. In the evolution of the human species and in most prehuman species no individual survived except as a member of a group. In fact, the individual survival has been much more dependent on the survival of the group than on any possible exertion which the individual could make on his isolated behalf. The result has been that both the normal instinct and its half-conscious enhancement by imagination, custom, and tradition have made the individual value his own personal existence less than that of his group. "It is sweet to die for one's country" because the survival of one's country is instinctively more significant to one than the survival of one's individual self. Such a driving emotion could only be felt as the fulfilment of a basic instinct, never as arising from abstract reasoning. Each individual unconsciously postulates his own existence in the continuity of his group because in the struggle for survival there was no other possibility of existence.

Never in the human species have the offspring been nurtured successfully except in families where the infant had in his own right a value around which the family activities centered. It has been found through the slaughter of the innocents that institutional care of infants is fatal. When the family ceases to hold the attention of the boy, he joins a gang, for whose reality he will fight bloody battles. The adult must be in some group as family, club, or neighborhood, otherwise he will be restless and lost like a rudderless ship. Excommunication was the worst punishment that could be imposed on a man in the Middle Ages, because it cut him off from those groups which were peculiarly his own, and so "the man without a country" arouses the pity of all who hear his plight, because in themselves they feel the horror and unnaturalness of it. Whenever an individual is by any means ungrouped, his struggle to regroup himself is just as immediate and unreasoned in its origin as the heliotropism through which simple-celled animals turn to the light. *Esprit de corps* is always specific, never general.

The group, however, is not a fixed thing any more than the kind of food or particular mate is fixed. An instinct is simply an impulse or tendency which is fulfilled in a general direction. The

newly hatched chick will peck at the head of a nail as though it were a fly, and it does not know why it is pecking. The particular kind of food that the chick will eventually eat by preference will depend on the opportunity of late circumstances. In like manner the group for which the instinct inclines the individual is quite undefined, and will be determined by a great variety of conditions. Or again, while the mating instinct is universal, the particular mate will be determined by various sorts of social control which will define the limits within which the selecting will take place. Public opinion, religion, education, exercise a direction over the mating instinct, and may inhibit its action, but in no way do they eliminate it. Through it the race survives.

Similarly the food instinct attains its fulfilment in whatever makes the individual survive; as the mating instinct with the accepted mate, so the group instinct has as its object whatever group for the moment posits survival. This will vary widely under changing circumstances, and there will be a striving to identify the proper group through the help of the senses just as the chick through its eye, taste, and muscle sensations learns both accuracy and discrimination in getting its food. The first group will be the immediate family—though under primitive conditions, both among animals and humans, the family was not clearly distinguishable from the pack, flock, clan, or tribe. Whatever it is, however, it is the group in which the individual maintains his existence and without which he would perish. All individuals which have not had the instinct to identify themselves with a group have been eliminated by the simple process of natural selection.

The sense of sight is probably the most significant at first in identifying one's own group, but smell, hearing, and touch are also employed. Any sensation that is familiar will ordinarily be safe. The ant, as Lloyd Morgan has shown, is attacked by members of its own hill if it has the odor of other ant hills. The degree of familiarity to the senses will not be constant, so symbolism is employed to supplement the limitations, such as the flag or costumes. The ancients used enemy and stranger synonymously, because it was necessary to be on guard against anyone not within

the group. "Consciousness of kind" is the recognition of some symbol with which one identifies his own group.

The most obvious group is the race whose similar color, hair, face, and form are easily recognized, so that race integrity is maintained by a natural grouping immediately recognized by the senses. The majority of the people within a race, however, do not know of the existence of other races, so that race, though an actual grouping, does not universally rise to consciousness. Considering race as the widest extreme, the local family or neighborhood group will be the narrowest, in which all the individuals may be known personally, or through some distinguishing local sign, as accent, costume, customs which are immediately familiar. Between these extremes there are almost infinite groups of which two are clearly defined: religion and nationality. These are complex and not so immediately obvious.

The relation of the individual to the groups is continually changing, as factors in survival are recognized. Thus religion defines a grouping in which the survival has various values whose recognition is not simple. Emotion, tradition, formalism, and reason impress themselves constantly until often the religious grouping has become a dominant one. The symbol by which it is recognized is ritual. In fact, with the exception of the immediate group and the racial group which are known directly, all the groups have some sort of symbolic ritual. This is peculiarly true of the nation which is of comparatively recent origin, but which has come to include most of the other survival values. Although religious organization was earlier and more inclusive, within recent centuries the nation has supplanted it, because that was even more comprehensive. The symbolism of the nation is very varied and has often been mistaken for merely geographical area or political organization. These are possible, but not exclusive marks. The only real test is the definition made by the attitude of the people themselves, and this may be based on common blood, common tradition, history, religion, or language, but, whatever be the basis, we must accept the fact that the national consciousness forms the most solid grouping at the present time. This does not mean that it is any more permanent than any which

have preceded it, but for the present more of the human race feel their survival to be in the nation than in any other grouping to which they may belong. The measure of this is found in the struggles which have been and are being made in behalf of the nation. National individuality is a reality of consciousness.

While particular groups may be in flux, the instinct will remain permanent. Psychologically, of course, it is a complex. Under changing conditions there may be many variations. When the wolf is separated from his pack, he is much distressed; when the wolf has evolved to the dog, he transfers his pack instinct to the family with which he identifies himself, and he will endanger his own life in behalf of that family as readily as previously he fought for his pack.

The so-called gregarious instinct is derived or sublimated from a prior group instinct which is always directed to a definite group. Loyalty and patriotism are the accompanying emotions, and the measure of character is to be found in them because they show that the individual has definitely identified himself with a value larger than his immediate self. We all respond to an example of loyalty, because it is needed in others for our own survival. Conversely, since we always judge an individual as a representative of his group, we lay upon him vicariously the virtues and vices of the whole. This is peculiarly apparent where there is hatred. Any member of a nation or class is with the greatest difficulty treated on his own merits. The universality of this mode of reaction can only point to its origin in our instinctive nature by which we transfer to another that which is potential in ourselves, viz., an organic relationship with the group.

Again, an individual without a group would be an inefficient, wild animal. In order to get the notion that as a person one is very much more closely related to his group than to his separate personality, one only needs, so far as possible, to think himself free from other human influences, and he will find that he would have no language, no customs, no morals—nothing but crude impulses.

We are the product of social relationships, or, in other words, of the groups to which we belong. We react in terms of our groups, and must always be understood as reflecting them.

We postulate many values and we find them realized in as many groups. These values have varying significance, and the groups in which they are realized have correspondingly varying allegiances. At a given moment an individual will not be able to arrange the groups to which he belongs in a smooth scale of values, because he has no means of relating them to each other and to himself. They represent different levels of existence. The food level, the play level, the mating level, the economic level, the spiritual level, *et al.* Under the best conditions none of these are threatened, so none rise strongly into consciousness. They are taken for granted. As they become more complex it is necessary to call in the aid of imagination and reason to supplement the instinct. When the food level demands a balanced ration, a highly organized culinary system is required; when mating is eugenic, science and religion are both needed. On the broadest spiritual levels, a moral, social, and political organization is required.

The moment the value is raised above the crudest sensual satisfaction, the other psychological faculties are employed to enable the individual to find his fulfilment. This may occur through education, persuasion through facts, or through propaganda. Propaganda uses all the arts at its command to show the individual that his salvation is assured only through some particular group. A large part of the world's activity consists in trying to convince people who do not easily perceive it that their survival in certain respects or on certain levels depends on their identifying themselves with some particular group. We do not naturally know that we belong to any of the complicated groups. We have to be made aware of our identity.

The Salvation Army would save the sinner from hell by having him feel his identity with the religious group. The patriot elevates the fatherland to the highest value; the socialist makes economic class-consciousness the goal. In all groups there are those who have seen new values before the others, and they become the prophets or the agitators according to the conditions. When the Englishman says that there would be no Irish question if it were not for the agitators, or the capitalist that labor would be content if it were not for the professional organizer, they are looking at an incident, not a main cause. Does the agitator represent a

potential group into which those whom he is trying to influence will naturally fall when they are aroused to a consciousness of the significance of the fact to themselves? If the agitation makes good, this will be unquestionable.

Loyalty and patriotism are merely the emotional side of the group instinct. They measure the identity of the individual with his group. In all nations during the Great War this normal emotion of national patriotism was greatly increased by concentrating all sorts of stimuli upon it. The appeals to hate and fear were the most effective. Both of these are also instincts which may supplement the group instinct. In America people became conscious for the first time that America was elementally significant to them. It was so significant that men and women eagerly offered to risk their lives for it. The point I wish to make here is that this patriotism was stimulated by propaganda. And this is always the case. One cannot see easily in such a complex group as a nation that his survival depends upon its survival. And the same thing is true of many other groups to which we potentially belong.

The method of arousing this potential loyalty is well illustrated by the machinery which is employed in all colleges and in each class to develop college spirit. It differs in no respect from the method of the evangelist in the revival meeting, or the political organization which plays up patriotism. And we are making much now of the development of community spirit, which is originally a primary grouping, but under the conditions of modern life has to be stimulated artificially.

From these illustrations it might be inferred that the individual is a somewhat passive recipient of an influence imposed on him by his group. This is not the case. He is simply by instinctive nature predisposed to the group, though he cannot always know until it is shown to him how important some particular group may be to his more complete existence.

We react to the group relationship unconsciously and without hesitation, because it is normal and natural. We have resentments and attachments as individuals to individuals, though even those are colored by our group membership, but our capital emotions are those related to a specific group. Since the reality of the group

is created out of the nature of individuals as a result of natural selection, the problems which arise from the relationship of groups in the world-process must be considered directly as problems which are to be solved by a proper consideration of the instinctive nature of man, and not from the point of view of its superficial manifestations. While the survival value of particular groups may vary with conditions and insight, the potency and inevitableness of the action of the instinct are the fundamental factors to be reckoned with in the reorganization of the world.